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TROTTER INSTITUTE

**Race and Political Empowerment:
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by
William E. Nelson, Jr.

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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**Race and Political Empowerment:
The Crisis of Black Leadership**

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1996

This Occasional Paper is based on a keynote address delivered at the Seventh Annual Conference of the Black Agenda Project in Boston, Massachusetts. William E. Nelson, Jr., is a Research Professor of Black Studies and Professor of Political Science at The Ohio State University, in Columbus, Ohio.

Foreword

Through the Occasional Paper Series, the William Monroe Trotter Institute is disseminating selected reports and papers based on research conducted under the auspices of the Institute. The analyses and conclusions contained in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions or endorsement of the Trotter Institute, or the University of Massachusetts Boston. This particular Occasional Paper, *Race and Political Empowerment: The Crisis of Black Leadership*, is based on a keynote address delivered at the Seventh Annual Convention of the Black Agenda Project. Since its inception in 1988, The Black Agenda Project has sponsored several conventions and forums focusing on political, policy and educational issues facing the black community of Boston and Massachusetts.

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Introduction: The Color Line Continues

W.E.B. Du Bois demonstrated poignant insight into the character of American society when he predicted in 1901 that the fundamental problem of the 20th Century would be the problem of the color line. Du Bois was writing in the aftermath of the first reconstruction that saw the institutionalization of Jim Crow and white dominance across the South. This period was symbolized by the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896. It was also marked by the capitulation of white Republican custodians of Reconstruction to the racist demands of southern politics, including the massive ejection of Black politicians from public office, the emasculation of the Black vote, and the crushing exploitation of Black laborers serving as peonage workers on Southern plantations.¹ At the turn of the 20th Century, America was in full stride as a class-based, inequalitarian society. The advent of World War I would bring little relief to the sufferings of the Black masses. The FBI, founded in 1908, would use much of its resources not to investigate the multitude of Black lynchings across the South, but to investigate suspected Black spies, traitors, and saboteurs.² In this atmosphere, white citizens were motivated to engage in the patriotic ritual of attacking Black citizens indiscriminately, including Black soldiers who were often lynched in their uniforms. During the bloody summers of 1917 and 1919, over two dozen white-initiated race riots took place in American cities.³

Clearly, during the early years of the 20th Century, the fundamental political issue in America was the maintenance and expansion of white control of Black life in a country where white supremacy reigned as a cultural icon, and a system of human oppression. 'As we stand on the dawn of a new century, we are faced with the stark reality that the racial dimensions of American life have not fundamentally changed. As Andrew Hacker notes, racism in American society is not diminishing but growing.⁴ The signs of growth are pervasive. Basic rights normally accorded citizens in society are

now being withdrawn from Black people with impunity. Thus, in Gainesville, Florida the owner of the local Yellow Cab Company admitted that the company has maintained a policy of not picking up young Black men for the past 15 years. The *Gainesville Sun* quoted the owner as saying: “Rule number 1 is never pick up a young Black male after dark if the place they’re calling from can’t clearly be identified. Rule number 2 is never pick up two Black men under these conditions. Rule number 3 is never pick up three Black males under these conditions”. These kind of attitudes are the foundation for the Rodney King phenomenon—police brutality against innocent Black victims. Historically, Black males have been stereotyped as animals, subhumans who are not entitled to the basic protections of the Bill of Rights.⁵ In the wake of this fear of the Black male, the scales of justice have been radically altered. Jails are now filled to the brim with Black prisoners because in some states certain categories of crime have been labeled exclusively Black.⁶ Thus, according to recent reports, while thousands of Blacks in California have been jailed for selling crack cocaine, whites are rarely arrested and prosecuted for this kind of offense by local California police departments.

Contemporary Racism in Black and White

Racism today takes the form of the systematic withdrawal of jobs, welfare benefits, business opportunities and social mobility resources from the Black community. The Republican Contract With America specifically targets for extinction programs designed to relieve the sufferings of the Black poor, among them school lunch programs, income maintenance programs, housing and health care programs.⁷ But racism in America does not have a uniquely conservative Republican face. The Clinton Administration has joined the bandwagon by cutting support for Medicaid and Medicare to fund tax breaks for the rich. In keeping with the prevailing political climate, the Supreme Court

majority fashioned by the Reagan and Bush administrations has taken giant steps to cut the heart out of a multitude of critical affirmative action programs. The *Croson* decision establishing a strict scrutiny policy for state and local affirmative action programs has been reinforced by the Maryland decision cancelling a Black scholarship program at the University of Maryland and a Colorado decision establishing a strict scrutiny policy at the federal level. The Colorado decision, *Adarand vs. Peña*, will probably become the 20th Century version of *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. It deliberately seeks to roll back the clock by making it impossible for most affirmative action programs to pass constitutional muster. Like *Plessy*, it makes the dubious assumption that Blacks and whites are playing on a level playing field. In doing so it recklessly ignores 100 years or more of racial oppression in America.

The court's negative affirmative action verdicts undoubtedly reflect its extreme sensitivity to surveys that show that over 70 percent of the white majority is opposed to so-called "racial preference" programs. This same instinct to cater to the whims of the white electorate has catapulted the issue of race to center stage in contemporary American politics. As Theodore Cross has noted, every major policy in America has a racial subtext.⁸ This is not a fortuitous development but one that has been embraced, cultivated, nurtured, refined and exploited by both major political parties. Thomas and Mary Edsall have cogently analyzed the exploitation of the race issue by the Democrats and Republicans in their book, *Chain Reaction*. They demonstrate how Republicans have used the issues of race rights and taxes to break up the old Democratic New Deal coalition by depicting the Democratic Party as a party seeking to promote the interest of minorities at the expense of the white majority. This strategy has had the effect of polarizing the electorate and isolating Blacks on the left wing of the Democratic Party.⁹

To stave off a substantial erosion of its political base, the Democratic Party has rejected its liberal leanings and abandoned much of its grassroots social welfare agenda. These developments are not new but can trace their origins back to the middle 1960s. While it is true that President Johnson embraced the cause of civil rights, it is also true that he committed some civil wrongs. Johnson's social welfare agenda became a casualty of the war in Vietnam. Yielding to pressure from local politicians, Johnson sealed the tragic fate of most of his war on poverty programs by refusing to fund them at survival levels and turning their administration over to state and local bureaucrats and elected officials.¹⁰

The 1964 Goldwater Campaign stimulated a more expansive white backlash against government support for minority interests. The Republicans effectively linked the presidential wing of the Democratic Party to so-called protected groups, stimulating a strong reaction by whites who considered themselves under siege by the civil rights revolution.¹¹ These trends were accentuated by Richard Nixon and his appeal to the silent majority. Under Ronald Reagan and George Bush, racially-polarizing strategies became the Republican Party's most potent political weapon. Responding strategically to the conservative mood of the country, Bill Clinton ran as a New Democrat and in the process ran away from the Black community. With Jesse Jackson on the sidelines in 1992, Clinton was free to swing to the right to capture the anti-civil rights, anti-government, property-holding White voters whose support he saw as pivotal to his election victory.¹² In keeping with his campaign promises, he has focused much of his domestic policy reform on issues that directly affect the freedoms and life chances of the Black poor.

Policy Outcomes

The politics of racial polarization has had a devastating impact on the social and economic status of the Black community. On the one hand, it has produced an upward redistribution of income for privileged whites; on the other hand, it has substantially enlarged the number of Black citizens who find themselves trapped at the bottom of the social order. Today more than one-third of Black families are poverty stricken—twice the rate of whites.¹³ Differences in wealth between Blacks and whites remain gigantic. On this issue Theodore Cross reports that in 1980 stocks, bonds and bank accounts held by Blacks were 0.7 percent of the national total. Black-owned or operated firms accounted for only two-thirds of one percent of the gross receipts of the nation's businesses. Black-owned or controlled banking resources were only seven-hundredths of one percent of the national total. Blacks owned virtually none of the nation's in ground petroleum and natural gas reserves valued at \$700 billion. Black ownership of single family homes was valued at 3.4 percent of the national total of \$2.3 trillion. Blacks own no significant proportion of the nation's office buildings, industrial parks, shopping centers or other commercial real estate valued at \$800 billion. Blacks held one-tenth of one percent of the total farm land acreage. Blacks had almost no stake in major communication resources including newspapers, television and radio stations, book publishers and cable television networks.¹⁴ Unfortunately, 12 years since the publication of these statistics, the status of Black wealth in America has not significantly improved.

Cross' grim statistics constitute the very definition of institutional racism. These results of the American racial system have led Professor Mack Jones to conclude that Black social and economic ills, such as double digit unemployment, inadequate schools, and blighted crime-ridden neighborhoods, are systemic features of the American political process. They are not aberrant

phenomena but arise when the various legitimate political and economic actors and institutions perform their roles in societally-expected and socially-sanctioned ways.¹⁵ Professor Jones contends that the tragic conditions that we find in many African-American communities are systemic, ingrained, endemic elements of the American racial system. They are a natural outgrowth and consequence of the way the system is structured and the way the system functions. It is expected that Black people will be at the bottom and not be able to move upward.¹⁶

Black Leadership Strategies

The enduring, intransigent character of white racial dominance in America has placed enormous pressure on Black leaders and institutions to mobilize political resources and create strategies capable of protecting Black human and civil rights, promoting Black social and economic progress and establishing the basis for the pursuit of democratic objectives. In a very large and profound sense, Black politics is liberation politics. It seeks to challenge the values of white supremacy and alter the direction of the prevailing social order. Black liberation politics eschews the integration of Blacks into the existing political process but attempts to change the process in ways that will remove all impediments to the exercise of democratic rights and establish Black control over key instruments of power and policy-making.¹⁷

To accomplish these objectives, Black political leaders have traditionally adopted an ideology of racial uplift. They have cultivated an attitude of oppositional consciousness, and created what Aldon Morris has called social movement organizations.¹⁸ Nineteenth-century Black leaders took up the banner of Black liberation politics and used it vigorously to promote the cause of Black freedom. Individuals like Edward Wilmont Blyden, Martin Delany, Sojourner Truth, Bishop Henry McNeill

Turner, H. Ford Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglass all railed against the system of white supremacy and organized to promote strong Black opposition to the system of white domination.¹⁹ The Black leaders who promoted the Back to Africa campaign in the 19th century clearly understood that the problem in the United States was not that a few white people were bigots, but that the entire system was racist from top to bottom, from the framing of the Constitution to the drafting of the iniquitous *Dred Scott* decision.²⁰ In the 20th Century much credit for Black progress must be given to visionary, courageous Black politicians such as William Monroe Trotter, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Adam Clayton Powell, Mary McLeod Bethune, A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King, James Farmer, Floyd McKissic, Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. These individuals were instrumental in promoting cognitive liberation and collective political insurgency in the Black community.²¹

The Crisis of Black Leadership

The deteriorating quality of Black life and the unremitting attack on Black interests by the conservative power block today reflects the existence of a leadership crisis in Black America of unprecedented proportions. The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a major change in Black leadership strategy from community politics to institutional politics. In recent decades leadership responsibility has been placed in the hands of Black elected officials. Unfortunately, many of these officials have been unable or unwilling to deliver on the fundamental policy objectives of the Black community. At work here, in part, is the reality of a massive reduction in problem solving resources triggered by the new federalism initiated by Nixon and expanded in subsequent administrations.²² But the problem also has deep organizational and ideological dimensions. The new generation of Black leaders have

come to power in the post-civil rights era and lack the spirit of racial consciousness, moral redemption and oppositional compulsion central to the character and policy preferences of civil rights protest leaders in the past.²³

Clearly, white power forces are taking advantage of what they see as a void in effective Black oppositional leadership. One could not imagine that the Republicans in Washington would have free reign to execute their contract on Black America if H. Ford Douglass, Ida B. Wells, William Monroe Trotter, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were still alive. Black America today has no response to the conservative onslaught. Today we wait in great anxiety wondering if the political stirrings ignited by the Million Man March will produce a permanent base of effective oppositional pressure against the current drift of national policy.²⁴ What is brilliantly clear at this point is that the Black community's unalterable reliance on institutional leadership has led to a decline in Black nationalist ideology. That decline has in turn neutralized a variety of potent political weapons that have in the past served as the bedrock of Black social, economic, and political development. This result emerges saliently from Robert Smith's analysis of the key components of Black nationalist ideology. According to Smith, this ideology has four essential components: 1) Consciousness of oppression at the hands of Europeans as the source of the African predicament in the Americas; 2) Awareness and appreciation of the persistence of group traits that distinguish Africans from others; 3) Pan-African consciousness that posits an obligation among Africans everywhere; and, 4) Belief that the subordinate status of the race can only be altered as a result of group self-reliance and unity.²⁵

These were the kinds of values Black politicians brought to the table in the 19th Century when they were campaigning against slavery and building African-oriented institutions during the

Reconstruction period and after. Today one is struck by the extent to which Black institutional leaders, especially elected officials, do not subscribe to these beliefs. As Professor Jones has pointed out, these leaders are becoming irrelevant to the struggle of the Black masses because they have become insiders rather than outsiders.²⁶ In contrast to past leaders, they have become integrated into the prevailing social order. They do not raise alternatives to the existing policy agenda. Many of them do not see themselves as race leaders, preferring to portray themselves as deracialized politicians bound to equally represent the interests of all citizens.²⁷ These politicians do not identify with the struggles of the Black masses. In their view, the concepts of unity, Pan-African consciousness and collective responsibility, are foreign propositions without political content or emotional resonance.²⁸ In the absence of a strong Black nationalist ideological foundation, Black leadership has become problematic—a scarce commodity of little utilitarian value to the compelling need for broadscale Black mobilization in the face of ominous challenges from disparate sectors of the white power structure.

Adding to the confusion is the emergence of the new Black conservatives who pretend that Black people do not have a collective interest around which to mobilize. This was the conclusion reached by Clarence Thomas in the *Adarand* case. Thomas contended that the quest for affirmative action represented a form of special pleading by Blacks, one that was un-American, constitutionally impermissible, and personally humiliating. Cornel West expresses somewhat the same idea when he criticizes Afrocentrism and calls on Black people to substitute moral reasoning for racial reasoning.²⁹

These arguments falsely suggest that Black people do not have a collective racial or social interest and uniquely impinge on the growth capacity of the nation by asking for political recognition and governmental resources. They ignore the well-documented history of the government's generosity

to white citizens of every description since the end of the Revolutionary War through land grabs, discriminatory political and business practices, and a host of racial preference programs that locked Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans out of entire sectors of American social, economic and cultural life.³⁰

Absent too from the analysis are the special benefits provided from the American treasury to American corporations. Michael Harrington in his book *Decade of Decision* demonstrates in stark and illuminating terms how the federal government placed American steel and oil companies on the dole in the 1970s. These companies became major welfare recipients. The federal government subsidized their international business ventures, underwriting their profits at the expense of the American people. These policies ultimately led to stagnation, producing widespread unemployment and poverty in cities across America.³¹ There appears to be no real understanding by contemporary Black leaders of the complicated character of the Black predicament. It is doubtful that the notion of establishing Pan-African linkages to confront international capitalism is on the agenda of the Black Congressional Caucus or the National Conference of Black Mayors.

The mounting of effective Black political strategies is further undermined by the involvement of Black leaders and organizations in clientage politics. Clientage politics means that white people are paying Black people to do white people's business.³² White people with money are major contributors to Black organizations and have a great deal to say about the agenda setting activities of these organizations.³³ Clientage politics has weakened the commitment by Black leaders to the development of a common political strategy. This dilemma is highlighted by the disintegration of relations between the NAACP and the Black Congressional Caucus in the wake of Jewish criticisms of efforts to bring Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam into an emergent national Black coalition.

The upshot has been the absence of major oppositional leadership at the national level. Black nationalism requires oppositional leadership. We are now compelled to ask the question, where is the opposition? It is a telling and painful commentary on the dysfunctional nature of Black leadership that in this critical moment in history there exists no major force to lobby for Black interests in the halls of Congress and throughout the federal bureaucracy. Reliance exclusively on the Congressional Black Caucus to play this role is questionable since the power of the Caucus is tied to the power of the Democratic Party and subject to the multitude of institutional constraints emanating from Congress itself.³⁴

In retrospect it is also clear that the Black presidential candidate card is no solution to the problem of effective national policy leadership. While the Jackson campaigns of 1984 and 1988 were effective in expanding Black consciousness and turnout, they also underscored the futility of clientage politics. The Jackson campaigns demonstrated that Blacks cannot significantly affect the policy agenda of the Democratic Party by rallying around a Black candidate in party primaries.³⁵ To be effective Blacks must embrace a politics of independence, one that will maximize Black leverage in the most important race, the general election.³⁶

At the local level Black liberation politics has suffered from the demise of Black insurgency politics. First generation Black mayors ran oppositional campaigns that defeated white controlled political machines and installed in office Black politicians who were veterans of the civil rights movement. Succeeding generations of Black mayors have become integrated into the prevailing power structure and built governing coalitions centered around the demands and preference of business interests.³⁷ Andrew Young in Atlanta was a prime example of this phenomenon. He once said he could not govern Atlanta without the Chamber of Commerce. Young did everything possible

to bring in business interests to help him establish the city's policy agenda. The results, in Atlanta and elsewhere, has been the upward redistribution of economic benefits and the accumulation of unspeakable poverty and degradation among the Black masses.³⁸ Declining revenues, due to the out-migration of middle-class citizens and diminishing federal assistance, have reduced many Black Mayors to serving as managers of politically and economically dysfunctional and dying communities.³⁹ Those who say that electoral politics is the answer must answer the question, if this is true, and we have numerous Black city regimes in place, why are Black people still heavily poverty-stricken and why are conditions deteriorating?

The Imperative of Oppositional Politics

A ray of hope in the present crisis of the Black community is provided by Professor James Jennings who documents the emergence of Black empowerment forces committed to reestablishing a strong sense of racial identity and consciousness in the Black community. Jennings views the emergence of these groups in the post-civil rights era as the key to the future social, economic and political advancement of Black people in America.⁴⁰

Although a full flowering of the leadership and organizational pattern described by Jennings has not been realized, it is clear that future racial progress in America will depend in large measure on the implementation of community mobilization strategies from the bottom up. This process must begin with the formation of independent community organizations dedicated to the goal of citizen education. In this regard, the point should be underscored that the goal of political education is just as important as the goal of electoral mobilization. Black leaders must make Black citizens aware of the fact that the process of politics is multi-dimensional. They must also emphasize the fact that

collective consciousness must precede collective action.⁴¹ Thus, when Black citizens vote they must vote instrumentally. Black instrumental politics must express itself in the arena of school politics, and around issues of health, safety, the environment, parks and recreation, zoning, and legislative redistricting.

Furthermore, the Black community must take the responsibility of building for itself a systematic network for the expression of oppositional politics. Under present circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect that the answers to social and economic needs of urban Black communities will come from city administrations wedded to strategies of corporate-centered development.⁴² Black leaders and organizations must build bridges of cooperation and forge intelligence networks essential to the promotion of effective oppositional strategies in the political process. Until the imperative of oppositional politics is met, the American political process will remain an unresponsive and hostile domain for the pursuit of the basic goals of Black liberation politics.

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